

AD LIMINA ADDRESS TO HOLY FATHER

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Holy Father, exactly 20 years ago, I was privileged to be among the crowd gathered in St Peter's Square to hear the announcement of your election to the See of Peter. Now, 20 years into your truly historic pontificate, I and my brother bishops of Aotearoa New Zealand welcome this opportunity to reassure you of our unaffected loyalty to your office and to yourself personally.

We thank you for your example of service and leadership, and especially for your remarkable writings. In the manner of God's appointed prophets, you have never hesitated to name those things which distort human life and dignity, and, also in prophetic manner, you never fail to give an account of the unsurpassable hope that is in us, (cf 1 Pet. 3:15).

We, in turn, would not wish to be like those false prophets of ancient times who sought their own advantage by telling the people that everything was well. Nor would it be in the spirit of the Apostles Peter and Paul for us, on the occasion of this ad limina visit, to speak less than honestly about some of our own concerns for the Church. It properly concerns all bishops when the credibility of the Church's claims are compromised by perceptions of inconsistency. Sometimes we bishops are unable to explain actions which seem inconsistent with the Church's most fundamental commitments.

In your Encyclical letter *Ut Unum Sint*, you courageously invited other Christian leaders to make suggestions about how the Petrine ministry might be exercised. Yet, within the household of the Catholic Church itself, Dicasteries of the Holy See occasionally make norms which impinge on the ministry of bishops with little or no consultation of the episcopate as such. This seems inconsistent.

In the spirit of the Second Vatican Council, you yourself have reaffirmed the Church's intention to "*preserve a proper freedom in the various forms of spiritual life and discipline, in the variety of liturgical rites and even the theological elaboration of*

revealed truth" (U.R. n.4). But that is hardly the experience of Eastern Rite Christians when their priests are evicted from, or not allowed to be ordained within, dioceses of the Latin Rite. Nor do such mechanisms of 'control' and 'dominance' encourage those who are crying out for greater progress in the complex but urgent matter of inculturation.

Within the context of your own remarkable contribution to the Church's social teaching, you have often given assurances that the faith cannot be imposed on anyone. But then, within the household of the faith we threaten with penalties those who have difficulties with teachings that the Church itself does not teach definitively - the so-called "third level" of teachings (cf cc.752, 1371). The religious respect required by the Second Vatican Council (L.G. 25) and by canon law (c.752) in the case of such teachings does not ultimately exclude the possibility of honest dissent and even reversal of positions taken historically by the Church. And so we simply ask whether it is appropriate to further burden by the threat of penalties those Catholics who try in good faith to combine their loyalty to the Church with integrity of intellect and conscience.

Of course, the Church rightly expects of them a sense of responsibility for the public good; they too must show the sensitivity which the apostle Paul insisted on in 1 Cor. 8:7-13. But, as you know, our responsibilities go beyond the requirements of good order to promoting respect for each person's right and duty to search for the truth and to obey conscience (cf c.748).

Holy Father, we appreciated your Encyclical letter *On the Dignity of Women* (1988) and your *Letter to Women* (1995). As we listen to Catholic women, we believe that the core of their claims, and the intensity of their concerns, is the need for a greater share of responsibility within and for the Church. You yourself have called on "*the ecclesial community to foster greater appreciation of women's gifts and to enable them to be more actively involved in roles of responsibility*" (cf *Letter to Women*, 11-12; *Address to Bishops of England & Wales*, 1997, n.7). We agree with you, and consider the matter urgent because only when that happens will people more easily see that equality does not derive from, nor depend upon, ordination. We look to the Holy See to exercise leadership by sharing with women all those roles which do not require ordination.

Our concerns extend beyond the Church itself to the world and especially to the needy. If in this brief address we focus on some of the Church's own needs, it is for the sake of its credibility and its mission in the world.

In the problems presently facing the Church we see the opportunity for pastoral leadership and hope. It is our desire to work with you and the universal episcopate to ensure that "the mystery of God's purpose" (cf Eph.1:9-10) continues to be "made manifest in the Church" (cf Eph. 3:10).